ALIAS SANTA CLAUS

By JOHN MOROSO

HIS second long term for burglary put the crimp in Jerry Gottlieb. His first term had been ten years, but his second had been twenty. He had slaved in the hell-hole called Sing Sing on a wage of half a cent a day for the first ten and a cent a day for the second long stretch of twenty. The reason for the increase in prison pay was that conscience began to stir among those politically appointed prisonkeepers and superintendents who are given charge of the defectives of the State of New York.

With an income of one cent a day it is conceivable that no large amount of money can be put by for the long, dim stretch of the road of life between the breaking of a man's strength and the time of his dissolution. Even burglars must cast about for a corner to die in. Then, too, there were fines to be paid out of this money—and graft. The cells of the older part of Sing Sing are so narrow and dark and foul that a man would give his soul for one night of sleep in the old chapel which has been turned into a dormitory. The price of the privilege of breathing in sleep was high. Gottlieb was getting old when he had served the twenty-eighth year of his prison life and so he paid out his hoard and was moved to the chapel dormitory. When he left prison for the second time he was an old man, penniless and friendless.

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It may have been the beauty of the sky that morning when he started the hike from the prison to the station at Ossining, or it may have been the sudden and wonderful vision of the river and the further wooded shore or, again, it may have been the caroling of the birds overhead; but whatever it was some of the heaviness of heart departed from Gottlieb, and he found himself walking almost lightly, and looking upward instead of downward. He was not of the savage, prognathous type of criminal, although his long years of confinement had given him the stigmata, especially in the writhing lips. He was a large man and with big blue eyes. Had he been well fed and well groomed he might have been termed a handsome old man, for his physique was fine and there was grave dignity suggested in his carriage. Gottlieb boarded a train and went to New York.

Every cop and at least a score of detectives eyed him as he trudged from the Grand Central Station south along Third Avenue in the direction of the Bowery. One of the "bulls" let the man pass apparently unnoticed and then turned and began to "tail" him. His business was to watch for returning criminals from Sing Sing and keep after them until they were safe again behind the high walls of the prison. He was a lithe, ferret-like creature with a close-cropped sandy mustache, shifty black eyes and the nervous hands of his kind. He slipped along through the crowds, a safe half block behind the old man.

It was a fine June day and the old convict enjoyed every moment of it. The crash of the elevated trains overhead and the clang of trolley gongs were music to his ears.

He wondered as he trudged onward whether Cock-Eye Garry McGarry would be still alive. Cock-Eye kept a ten-cent table d'hote in Chatham Square, and if a man just out of stir went to his place without a cent in his pockets he might peel potatoes or scrub the floor for a good meal and, perhaps, the privilege of sleeping in the coal bin under the sidewalk. In due time he found that Cock-Eye had been gathered to his fathers, but that the place was still running. The new proprietor needed a man to help with the scullion work for a day and Jerry Gottlieb worked at the appointed task, filled his stomach and started forth at sunset to carry the banner, which phrase, in the jargon of the underworld, means to walk the streets during the night.

Jerry made his way farther south to Park Row and then east to Oak street. Near the green lamps of Oak street police station was an old house with the windows lighted. Over the door was a large sign with this legend:

"Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat; yea, come, buy wine and milk without money and without price."

It had been his intention to explore the docks of South street, for it would not be a hard matter to find a spot between the great bales and boxes of freight where he could crawl and rest without having the soles of his feet fanned by a night stick. He paused to read the words of Isaiah. Whatever it had been that had lightened his heart in the early morning came to him again and he did not read this invitation from the little mission in Oak street with any feeling of irony within him. He was pondering the marvel of wine and milk without price, when a little, clean-shaven man, shabbily clad and of his own age, started up the steps, turned, came back to him and then took him by the arm, saying: "Come along, brother. You belong here as much as I do." The stranger carried a battered Bible under his left arm, tucked close to his body.

Gottlieb entered the long meeting room with its slick benches and grimy wall paper, its Biblical texts offering the Lord's help tacked here and there, and its little stand at one end for the preacher. There were hardly a baker's dozen of men on the benches. They turned and stared at Gottlieb for a moment and then followed with their eyes the little man as he went toward the stand and opened his Book.

The old convict slipped into a seat, tired of body, but feeling at home among the tatterdemalions of society that had gathered to hear the shabby advocate of God among the miserables say what he had to say in his Master's behalf.

Out in the hall the little man with the cropped sandy mustache rolled a cigarette and sat at the foot of the stairs, a sinister thing in the yellow light of a flickering gas jet.

The mission worker began his preaching, and he talked directly to the old gray outcast in the rear of the room. The preacher was of the underworld cognoscenti. He had "the know," as Gottlieb would more humbly express it. Gottlieb was as a prize at Armageddon. The forces of kindliness, Christliness and divine love were fighting for him against the forces of the written law typified in the "shadow" in the hall.

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A great peace descended upon the soul of Gottlieb. It dropped quietly, strangely, wrapping his inner being as a veil or as a fog or as the early morning mist might fold about a flower that had somehow managed to live through an exhausting and still summer's night. The wings of an angel of God were fanning his heart. He did not know that, and yet he was grateful. Some of us breathe our religion as we breathe the air.

The old mission preacher talked the language of Gottlieb's own tribe. He, too, had done the wrong things in life and had come to know the sad and yet helpful lessons of regret. Something in the preacher's argument for righteousness shone forth above all possible forms of creed and dogma. The attitude of this worn and aged worker in the vineyard was so stripped of formal ministerial vesture that it gave semblance to the attitude of Jesus Christ, who was a poor and humble Man.

For five years Gottlieb hung about the threshold of this genuine if dingy place of worship in Oak street. His beard grew until it reached his waist in a cascade of silver. He lost the prison pallor and a flush of health came to his cheeks. Until his friend, the preacher, gave him the job as janitor of the mission, he slept on the wharves, crawling between bales of freight of all sorts, like the Son of Man, uncertain of anywhere that he might call his own for the casual slumber of the harried fox.

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Remorseless mutation brought death to Gottlieb's preacher friend. He had to die some time, somewhere, somehow, of course. So Gottlieb's friend staggered to Gouverneur Hospital around on Front street and was put to bed. The old convict went to see him on the third gray day of his sickness, and a friendly, fevered hand crept from between the sheets toward the two hands of his visitor.

"Jerry," said the dying man, "good-bye."

"Good-bye, and God bless you," said Jerry.

"He has blessed us both."

"Yes, sir; he has done that."

"Will you take my job for me, Jerry?"

"I wish I could, sir," replied Jerry, his eyes lighting until they were as two blue lakes.

"But you can and you will. You must." The old preacher tried to raise himself on an elbow, but failed. Jerry's long arms reached under him and lifted him to the pillows.

"You see, sir," the old convict explained, "I'm a two-termer and the bulls always keep after me. I'd get the whole mission pinched if I did anything else but clean up the place. That's my job, sir, I'm the janitor!"

"Ha!" The mission preacher's tongue clove to the roof of his mouth. He died.

It was in the late fall when this happened. The first snow was flying and making a mist over the East River, which stretches like a ribbon of tarnished silver under the bridges between Brooklyn and Manhattan. Gottlieb felt the hands of his friend grow cold. He left the body as a nurse came and made a record for her report of the transition of the evangelist. He went to a window and looked out into the fleecy, tumbling sky. He told himself that he would meet his friend again some time, somewhere, somehow. He had come to believe in the promises of God. He stood stroking his great white beard at the window, pondering mightily. Two tears welled to the lashes of his eyes.

"Well, Santa Claus!" a voice sounded in his ears. "Why not come down-stairs with me and have a cup of tea?" The nurse had come to offer, as best she could, her sympathy.

"Santa Claus?" he repeated, and his voice was sonorous and sad.

She took him by the arm and led him away from his friend who had died.

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A little, paunchy dominie, with round cheeks and a diploma from a seminarial institution, endeavored to take up the work that Gottlieb's friend had relinquished because of the closing of his eyes in eternal slumber. He was, however, not of the humble. He parted his name in the middle, and in Oak street that seems a strange thing to do.

The well-polished benches of the mission were packed for the first preachment of the comfortable dominie, but when the sermon was over the spindrift congregation departed with knowing looks between one and the other. Some of the comments were almost vulgar. Izzy the Dip, who had just finished a five-year trip up the river and who had dropped in the hope that he might take the new preacher's watch and small change during the process of redemption, dubbed him the Duke of Durham.

One day the mission doors were locked, and Jerry Gottlieb stood on the worn steps stroking his patriarchal beard thoughtfully. It was a sinister day for him, for his job was gone and his only friend was gone. The Rev. T. Beverly Wainwright, the successor of the old evangelist, had received a call, had communed with God and had been instructed by his Father in Heaven to go to a very snug parsonage in the upper West Side, where the "sisters" would weave him comfy footwear for his hours of religious abstraction and where he would fatten, marry and end his days with ecclesiastical unction.

There had been no salary attached to the job of Jerry Gottlieb, janitor of this closed house of God. His friend who had struggled so hard to redeem others had lived a life of bitter poverty and glorious sacrifice. But there had been a place to sleep and always a bite to eat, for the Oak Street Mission had managed a handout of soup or broth, and bread, along with its handout of salvation. Now the bread and the broth and the corner to sleep in were gone. A faith in God was his only remaining asset.

There was one place for him to visit, Cock-Eye's old place. It was and is a rendezvous of thieves, but the handout is there just the same. Gottlieb wandered north on Park Row, the sunshine of a brilliant November day making his great beard glisten as a shield when he made the crossings of the streets and passed between the shadows of the elevated structure. He got the expected handout, after scouring the floor of the kitchen, was given permission to sleep in the coal bin, and in the morning he was on his way again in pursuit of a task, a little food and perhaps a momentary rest in the city's wilderness.

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The great dream and hope of all the silver-grays of the outcasts of New York is a job as a night watchman. There is no other job that they are thought capable of filling. They are too old to run elevators; too old to be trusted with hurrying to and fro with messages; too old for anything save to make the rounds of a building, fit a key to the watchman's register and show that they are on the job. When the ancients fail in landing these snug-harbor places they have before them ragpicking or the job of the sandwich man. Gottlieb tried for any kind of work, day after day, night after night, and got nothing. His flowing Santa Claus beard was against him. The snow began to fly again and when he was driven from doorways by the cops he would collect old newspapers, cover himself with them and sleep on a bench in one of the parks. The newspapers held in what warmth there was in his body and the snow covered him and sealed his poor-man's blanket. By morning, a half recumbent snow man would catch the eyes of the first drift of the human tide to their places of work.

Again and again he was compelled to resort to Cock-Eye's place for a handout and a few moments of warmth. There he received many tempting offers. One was from a famous pickpocket who wanted to use him as a stall—that is, as the man who gets in the way of a victim and gives the thief a chance to escape. His dignified appearance and almost benign expression which had come with the faith his dead friend of the mission had transmitted to him would serve the thief well. He was very hungry and very cold, but one lesson had been driven into him along with the lesson of faith. It rang with hope and his dead friend had ever had it on his lips. From the book of Isaiah it came:

"Fear thou not; for I am with thee; be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness."

Another temptation came to him, this time from the sly, sandy-mustached person who was ever at his heels, the headquarters' bull whose business it was to watch those who had sinned, had paid for their sin, and who might be expected to sin again. The detective wanted him for a stool pigeon. In Cock-Eye's he would get all the news of the underworld, could play in with thieves and burglars and confidence men and then betray them. He would be paid and would have a place to sleep and something to eat. He could even have an overcoat and gloves.

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Gottlieb, alias Santa Claus, as he was now known to the police, shook his venerable head. He was no Judas. The detective insisted and finally threatened to "frame" him. Gottlieb still shook his head, and slaved any and everywhere for a handout and a little warmth. He was arrested as a vagrant and sent to Blackwell's Island for thirty days. "When you change your mind," his shadow informed him, "send me word."

There was no change of mind and Gottlieb served his thirty days, a month of somewhere to sleep and something to eat. He came out on the eve of Christmas and once again started his hunt for a corner to lie in and a chance to pay for it. He managed to earn a dime that morning by helping an overloaded home-going shopper get aboard an elevated train with his bundles. With 5 cents of this money he went to a barracks-like building far downtown where peddlers are supplied with anything from folding baby carriages to shoestrings. He invested half of his capital in shoestrings—ten pairs. The retail price is 5 cents a pair.

Alias Santa Claus had sold half of his stock when the late afternoon of a cheery, crisp Christmas Eve came. The streets were heavy with snow and it was still coming down wispily from the heavens. Gottlieb took a stand at Warren street and Broadway to catch the tide of commuters hurrying to the Erie ferry over on West street. He had earned enough for a 15-cent lodging and a 10-cent meal and still had half his stock. He was grateful, and the dawn of Christmas promised to come less gloomily than had any dawn since his friend died.

The laughing holiday swarm from the skyscrapers, all burdened with Christmas gifts, all gay with the spirit of the happy season, swept by the old man who held with German stolidity to the idea that God was his friend and that His right hand would uphold him. The skyscrapers were alight early, for the snow clouds deepened as the afternoon wore on and the fall from above began to come in flakes as big as pancakes, whirling, twirling swiftly against the veils of the women and up about the shoulders of the richly clad.

A finely dressed lady bought a pair of shoestrings and gave him fifty cents, bidding him keep the change. Here was a bonanza. On Christmas Day he could lie in his lodging house bed and rest his tired old bones. He could linger about the stove in the reading room and keep warm all day, and he figured out he could have two meals surely—real meals, ten-cent meals—bean soup, bread, coffee and hash!

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The ruddy cheeks shone above the silver beard, and the blue eyes of the ancient itinerant on the corner of Warren street glistened as he pondered this fine prospect. A big limousine came plowing through the snow and stopped on the Warren street side of the corner. A fine-looking man of middle age in a fur-lined broadcloth coat opened the door and beckoned to Gottlieb. He was the type of the successful downtown business man, keen and yet kindly of eye, clean shaven and healthy of color.

"Would you like to make ten dollars a day during the holidays?" he asked Gottlieb.

"Ten dollars a day!" gasped Santa Claus.

"Yes, and easily," explained the rich man. "My little boy doesn't believe in Santa Claus any more and I know that a mask doesn't fool him now. I want him to believe in Santa Claus just as long as possible, and if I rig you up tonight we'll put one over on that lad, by Jupiter we will! What do you say?"

"It's a godsend to me, sir," replied Gottlieb.

"Jump in!"

The big limousine forged ahead, hurling great gouts of white to right and left. On the Jersey side of the river Santa Claus and the father of the little boy who didn't believe any longer took a parlor car and the train whisked them far into the country to a great house among fir and cedar trees burdened with snow, a place of many servants and of great fireplaces, of warmth and luxury, where the little boy who had come upon unbelief for the first time in his little life was to be reclaimed.

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He had had no opportunity of bathing since leaving Blackwell's Island prison, and in the quarters assigned to him under the eaves of the mansion was a bathroom. There he washed and made himself clean. His generous host had fresh linen brought him to replace the rags he had worn, a suit of clothes from the wardrobe of the butler, and finally a glorious meal, which he ate before a bright coal fire.

Outside the snow beat against the window panes and the wind swirled in the cornices of the building and soughed in the firs and the bending cedars. The well-worn Bible which his friend had bequeathed him lay open on the table at his right hand. He read the passages of hope and promise he had learned to love during the early days of his regeneration and then, following the instructions of his host, stretched himself out on the bed, rolled up in a blanket, and slept. After nights in doorways, under paper covering in the parks, or in the coal bin of the late Cock-Eye Garry McGarry's place, he felt as if he were falling through a cloud, so soft and deep was the bed.

At three o'clock he was awakened by the master of the house, who spoke very softly and whose countenance shone with delight.

"A Merry Christmas! A Merry Christmas!" he whispered. "It is time."

He had brought with him all of the disguise of Santa Claus save the false beard and mask. Those were not needed. Gottlieb pulled on the shiny black boots, baggy red trousers, red greatcoat and cowl, all edged with new white fur, and finally thrust his hands into the gauntlets.

Down from the roof came the sound of sleigh bells violently shaken. "I've got the butler up there announcing your arrival," whispered the father of the little lad who did not believe any more. They tiptoed down stairs ever so carefully, although not a creature was stirring, and went to the living room, which was really a great hall, high of ceiling, wainscoated and with a big fireplace. From outside came the winding of a horn, the trampling of hoofs in the snow and more fierce jingling of bells. The steeds of Kris Kringle were horses from the stables hidden in the shadows.

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In the living room a tall, dark-haired lady in white was lighting the last of the candles on a great Christmas tree, in the fragrant boughs of which frosted angels winged, and gold and silver tinsel gleamed. At its base were piled all the treasures of toyland that the heart of a child could wish for. The lady gave a little cry of astonishment at the vision of Santa Claus, went to him, put her jeweled hands on his shoulders, looked into his blue eyes and said: "Why, you are really Santa! I'm so glad you've come to see my little ones." Her eyes glistened as brightly as the diamonds in her rings, and she turned away and pretended to be fixing something on the tree.

"Now, dear," said the master of the house. "It is my turn. You get ready to watch the children turn out, and when the clock in the hall strikes four we will sing the carol. It is three-thirty now. By Jupiter, we're going to put something over on Laddie this time!"

The mistress gone from the room, Santa and his host packed a great red bag with toys and placed it beside the wide hearth. The master then drew from an inside pocket his gift to his wife and laid it in the top of the bag "That's for her," he whispered to Santa. "If it wasn't for that dear lady there wouldn't be any Christmas for me."

He asked Gottlieb to watch the candles on the trees carefully and to be ready at the striking of the chimes in the hall. "You might take the armchair here and pretend to have fallen asleep," he suggested as he slipped from the room.

Save for an occasional crackling or hissing from the logs on the hearth there was the profound stillness of the hour before a wintry dawn. Gottlieb glanced about him and saw that his host was a man of great wealth. Magnificent paintings were on the walls; rugs of wonderful weave were on the floor. A glimpse into the dining-room showed him silver and gold ware of great value. Cut glass and rare china glistened from the shadows. He felt curious to see the gift which the master of the house had selected for the mother of the little ones and he opened the wide, flat case of morocco lying at the top of his Christmas pack. A blaze of white fire struck his eyes. It was a diamond necklace of priceless value, each stone a gem of wonderful radiance. His breath caught.

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He had heard of such things, had heard them talked about in whispers in Cock-Eye's place, and he knew how easy it was to dispose of the necklace, selling a stone here and another there to the keepers of fences for jewel thieves in New York, Chicago, London, Paris and the other great cities of the world. Some of the ruddiness left his face. If the necklace was worth one hundred thousand dollars to the purchaser it would be worth ten thousand to the thief.

Ten thousand dollars! Why, even one thousand dollars would keep him clothed, housed, and fed for the few remaining years of his life and there would be enough left over to keep his old body out of Potter's Field. He could live comfortably on fifty cents a day for two thousand days! His hands trembled and the white fire of the diamonds flashed more temptingly. He closed the case and placed it again at the top of the contents of his pack.

Gottlieb stared into the bright embers among the ashes on the hearth. Light and shadow danced fantastically before him and then there seemed to come to his inner vision the ghostly glimpse of a face. Deeper in reflection, the voice of a dying man sounded in his brain: "God has blessed us both, Jerry." And then the echo of his own voice: "He has that, sir." His eyes closed as the chimes sounded in the hall.

The roguish face of a boy, beneath tousled brown curls, peeked around the casing of the hall door. Pussy-footed and in his one-piece night suit, he stole quietly up to the armchair by the fireplace and laid violent little hands upon one of Jerry Gottlieb's arms.

"I've got you, Santa!" rang out his voice in childish triumph. "I've got you!"

Gottlieb turned his blue eyes on the lad.

"I fell asleep, son," he said. "What are you going to do with me?"

Laddie's eyes opened wide. It was not a mask that he gazed into, but a real human face. It was not his father's voice that had spoken, but the voice of a stranger. As if to prove to him that he had gone wrong in his disbelief in the good old saint, Santa stroked his great white beard and then lifted him to his lap. The boy, still doubting a little, gave a surreptitious tug at the beard, where upon Santa said: "Ouch! Don't do that."

From upstairs in the music room came the notes of an organ, so softly and faintly that they might have existed only in the imagination. Then the high voices of children, the lark-like note of their mother and the diapason of their father's voice sounded in a Christmas carol:

"For lo! the days are hastening on,
By prophet bards foretold,
When with the ever-circling years
Comes round the age of gold;
When peace shall over all the earth
Its ancient splendors fling
And the whole world give back the song
Which now the angels sing."

Then came the patter of little feet upon the stairs and the joyous laughter of the parents and in a moment they were all around Jerry Gottlieb and the little boy, who snuggled in his arms, contented in his new-found faith in the good saint.

"I caught him, daddy! He belongs to me!" announced Santa's captor. Something warm fell to one of the little hands on Gottlieb's breast and the boy looked up. "Oh, daddy," he whispered, his voice breaking in childish sympathy, "Santa is crying!"

Gottlieb forced a smile to his benign countenance, lifted the lad to the floor and began to unpack his treasures. He gave the diamond necklace to the lady, who said: "Thank you, dear Santa Claus." Then he drew the wonderful toys from the pack, and mother and father helped him present them to the wondering little ones in their nighties. "Thank you, dear Santa Claus," lisped each.

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They were busy with their new playthings when Santa saw his opportunity and slipped from the room, hurrying silently to his quarters under the eaves. When the master followed him a few minutes later he found him in the street clothes furnished by the butler, kneeling beside the bed in prayer. He drew back into the shadows of the hall.

Gottlieb rose from his knees, placed the Bible in one pocket and picked up a weather-beaten felt hat. Then he opened the drawer in the table and removed therefrom four slices of bread, a piece of meat and two potatoes, the remains of his supper, which he had hidden from the eyes of the butler. Food was too precious to be wasted. He placed these scraps in his other coat pocket and turned, suddenly facing the man who had employed him.

"I thought I might get ready to leave, sir," he explained. "If the little boy saw me again before next Christmas it might upset matters."

The little boy's father put a hand on the old man's shoulder.

"You don't know how much you have done for me." He spoke feelingly. "Why, man, you've saved to my eldest-born a whole year of the faith and happiness of childhood."

"He is a fine lad, sir. I never had a child in my arms before except once when I picked up a little broken fellow from the street after an automobile had hit him."

"My laddie fell in love with you the moment he saw you," said the father. "He's crying for you now, but I told him you would be back with us next Christmas."

"Yes, sir, if God spares me."

"But you can't go back to the streets to make a living. You must let me take care of you from now on, so that you will be a real Santa Claus for all of the little ones until they have grown up. I know that you have no job or you would not have been out trying to sell shoestrings on the streets."

"I looked hard enough for a job many a day, sir."

"Well, I have a dandy one for you," confided the master of the house. "I belong to a syndicate which owns a skyscraper downtown and we need another night watchman. You will have a whole flat furnished on the top floor and every comfort in summer and winter that a man might ask."

"A night watchman!" cried Gottlieb, his eyes sparkling.

"Yes; don't you want it?"

"Want it? It's too good to be true, sir."

The gift of laddie's father to Santa Claus was a well-filled purse in which was one of his business cards. "The card in the wallet will admit you to my office at any time after the holidays," he told Gottlieb. "In the meantime, find a good place to stay and buy all the things you need. We had better get out to the lodge, where you can be comfortable until you are ready to start back to the city. I am afraid that laddie will begin a search for you, and if he does he will not rest until he has had every room and closet opened and all the chimneys swept." The happy parent laughed his delight at having "put one over on the boy."

Gottlieb stroked his great beard as he pondered all this wonderful good fortune that had come to crown his last years after a lifetime of bearing the cross of ignorance and sin and suffering. Surely his dead friend had watched over him from heaven, to help him along, protect and guide him. Surely there had come true the prophecy: "A little child shall lead them."

Laddie's father took him by a hand and they tiptoed to the head of the servants' stairs.

"Easy, now," whispered Gottlieb's new friend. "He might hear us, the little rascal."

Gingerly they gained the servants' entrance and disappeared in the shadows of the solemn cedars.

"I've Got You, Santa!"